Author(s): Bissell, Gavin A.

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SPENCER'S PRINCIPLES OF PSYCHOLOGY AND THE DECLINE OF UTILITARIAN PREMISES IN BRITISH PSYCHOLOGY

Gavin Bissell
University of Bradford.

Despite the revival of interest in nineteenth century psychology and ethics in Britain during the 1980s, and the current debate around Utilitarian ethics in medicine (Buckle, 2005) and care (Offer, 2004), Utilitarian premises, understood as a psychological theory rather than as a moral philosophy, remain largely dormant in contemporary British Psychology. This is so despite their apparent survival in Behaviourism (Plaud & Vogeltanz, 1994).

This article examines aspects of their decline within Victorian psychology, by focussing upon the relatively neglected psychological writings of Herbert Spencer. In doing so, it seeks to make a modest contribution to unravelling the complex changes in the nature of nineteenth-century psychology. In particular it is argued that, whilst some explanations of the decline of Utilitarian premises in the Victorian development of psychology focus upon the later part of the century and cultural or institutional factors, an examination of Spencer's works at the mid-century supports the view that changes were under way earlier. Whilst several explanations might be offered for this, changes in economic organisation and in the experience of individual agency are highlighted.

The relation between Utilitarian psychology and Utilitarian ethics will then be considered. Finally, at this stage it should be possible to comment upon the significance of the marginalization of Utilitarian premises within the development of Victorian psychology for the contemporary debate about health resource allocation.

If Herbert Spencer's system of synthetic philosophy is chiefly remembered, if it is remembered at all, as the ‘wrong’ theory of evolution, and if his sociology stands condemned for its glaring ethnocentrism, then we cannot wonder to find his *Principles of Psychology* receiving limited attention, despite the renewal of study in the development of psychology suggested by the formation of the History and Philosophy Section of the British Psychological Society in 1987.

Without laying claim to anything more than a minor footnote to the history of British psychology, however, it might nonetheless be suggested that the neglected 1855 *Principles* signify an important transition within the discipline during the nineteenth century as a whole. It might not be going too far to say that the *Principles* perhaps represented, on one hand, the last major expression of British psychology's direct formulation of mental phenomena in terms of activity; and on the other, an expression of its emerging interest in mental structure, during the nineteenth century. [OK to run on?] This, at least, may be its illustrative value today, even though there may be other Victorian texts of significance here (for example Bain, 1855, 1859), and it is perhaps

true that Spencer was not a great innovator in this field (Murray, 1929).

In the following discussion, ways in which the *Principles* might illustrate these changing interests will be examined, and their place within the wider corpus of Spencer's ideas discussed: Spencer's psychological ideas tend to overflow into his sociology, in particular. More generally, it will be argued that the ambience of feeling about individual agency may be a useful key to understanding the place occupied by the *Principles* in the Victorian development of psychology.

The displacement of Utilitarian premises by Spencer can be seen as an important step in the development of the new interest in cognitive structure, and appears in a particularly succinct and unceremonious manner in his 1857 essay *Progress: Its Law and Cause*. Here Spencer displaces the conception of Man as motivated by drives towards the satisfaction of wants (and thereby towards greater happiness) into a side position, joining to it a picture of cognitive and other structures that [if the clause this introduces cannot be deleted, i.e. it's integral to the meaning, then it's 'that' and not 'which'] stresses the differentiation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous.

By placing the emphasis upon the development of structures, per se, rather than upon the consequences of activity in the world for individual interests and desires, he clears the way for an analysis of mental structure which decentres the Utilitarian psychology of pleasure and pain. The significance of this transition becomes more apparent when the broader detail of both Spencerian and Utilitarian theory is examined.

Utilitarian psychology fitted into the political economy of the early nineteenth century. Such interpenetration is found in, for example, the work of James Mill, often considered the doyen, though perhaps not the leading intellect, of political economy at this time (Winch, 1966); his *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829) and his *Elements of Political Economy* (1821) are works of this kind. In the *Analysis* appears a psychology of the individual of the 'heroic age' (Checkland, 1959) of British capitalism, a psychology which is of a piece with the picture of active individual expansion of capital presented in the *Elements*.

Spencer's *Principles*, on the other hand, depict a psychology which, within the *Statics* (1851), met political economy much more tangentially. Individual expansion of wealth is no longer regarded as the *primum mobile* of beneficial change and harmony, and the principle of functional adaptation of social entity to environment through structural differentiation has taken its place. It is therefore not surprising to find in the *Principles* an emphasis upon functional adaptation of the individual to environment through differentiation of the structure of cognition. Checkland (1959) has observed of this period that its economic sense registered a 'movement from below', a general development of production itself; Spencer's stress upon increasing differentiation of function as the *primum mobile* of social change perhaps corresponds to this. There is a mass of material that could be drawn in here, if space permitted. The annals of the economic section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, for example, contain some candid references to these changes (Author, 1986).

In short, the structure of cognition became an object of new interest to the nineteenth century just at the time at which the role of the individual as an agent in social change was de-emphasised. It is as though the current of social change now flows alongside

the individual, who participates in, but is not central to it, and at this moment mental structure becomes an independent object of study of especial interest.

Despite this de-emphasis of individual agency, however, activity retains a primary position in Spencer's *Principles of Psychology*, the position it had occupied in Mill's *Analysis*. Following Aristotelian tradition, Mill linked the important perceptions of time and space to motion, stressing, however, the significance of activity. From the experience of muscular resistance we derive the ideas of extension and motion; the action of our own bodies, the feelings which attend muscular action, underpin them. The idea of time arises from the succession of antecedents and consequents, cause and effect in actions.

Spencer, too, deduces that the experience of muscular resistance within activity is of cardinal significance, since it produces the mode of consciousness to which all others are reducible: time, space, and motion rest upon it. For example (*Principles* 1855:253): "It follows that that which is required to produce changes of state, is that through which time is disclosed." Of course, there are differences here: Spencer is more concerned with collisions with the world than was Mill, who restricted himself more to antecedent and consequent, pleasure and pain within actions involving motive and interest of the individual, a difference which reflects the more general displacement of Utilitarian premises by Spencer.

Spencer continued the practice, then, of allotting to activity a cardinal role in psychology. But what became of Spencer's Utilitarianism (Parsons, 1937)? Many British works that succeeded the *Principles* in the late nineteenth century tended to throw more effort into the analysis of the structure of cognition and to drop the insistence upon the role of activity altogether. Hence when, for example, the Oxford philosopher Leonard Hobhouse wrote his *Theory of Knowledge* towards the end of the century he could say with Shadworth Hodgson (and William James for that matter) that the centrally important experience of time was simply a given, a structure of consciousness even, something not to be explained in terms of physical activity certainly. (With regard to the overlap with James, see also Stout, 1899. Stout's rejection of James Mill's associationism is interesting too in this respect).

When the wider outline of Hobhouse's ideas is examined it becomes a little easier to see what had happened to Spencer's *Principles*. Hobhouse was part of an intellectual milieu which included the Webbs, Bosanquet, and the architects of social policy in the early years of the twentieth century, most of whom set their faces resolutely away from Utilitarianism (Offer, 2004). Hobhouse's social philosophy, presented in *The Labour Movement* (1893), depicts progress as a product of collective moral reasoning acting through the state and piecemeal social reform, rather than as the product of general evolutionary tendencies of structural differentiation and adaptation operating at the level of the social organism. It is certainly a very long way from Mill's progress through the individual pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain: neither material activity nor individual agency occupies a driving seat in Hobhouse's social philosophy in the way they did for Mill.

Arguably, then, Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* were no longer relevant by 1900 because it now seemed much more difficult to speak about the place of individual activity in progress at all, let alone the sort of individual agency that even Spencer had

dropped in favour of a sort of automatic progress with general activity. Indeed, it was just this latter sort of progress, asserted Hobhouse in *The Labour Movement*, that no-one believed in any more, now that the mid-Victorian period of active proprietorial capitalism was being overshadowed by the complex reality of international finance, and Rentier capitalism was numbing the outline and relatively simple predictability of sweat-and-smoke production. Again, although there is not space for a detailed exposition here, it is instructive to read the passing comment of the period, for example reflected in the letters pages of the textile press (especially during the years of the 1873–1896 depression of trade), and in the writings by contemporary commentators in journals such as *The Nineteenth Century.* They are starkly different from those of commentators writing in, say, *The Edinburgh Journal* half a century earlier on the experience of trade. (Author, 1986).

It might be objected that the economically active class and its spokespersons in the later nineteenth century did not overlap with that of the writers of psychology texts in the ways that it did in the days of James Mill and The Political Economy Club, to which club David Ricardo and Nassau Senior belonged, or as it did in the days of Spencer and his circle, which included the Strutts of Derby and other social and economic thinkers. If this were so, then there might be no reason to expect any harmony at all between psychological theory and the experience of economic agency in the later nineteenth century.

This is debatable. On one hand, economists and psychologists were increasingly likely to be found sequestered inside the walls of traditional academic establishments, isolated from one another's work. On the other hand, the enlarged passive share-ownership class increasingly formed the milieu which supported reflection and theory. One can but point to similarities between psychological theory, economic theory, and the experience of agency reflected in the literature of the period.

One of the few remaining attractions of Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* in this changed climate was perhaps the study of cognitive structure, with some sort of pragmatic reworking to drop the assumption of growing harmony, the theory of development and the increasingly suspect assumption that activity underpinned any cognitive appropriation of the world that was of much use. It seems likely therefore that Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* floundered because, as Hawthorn (1976) has contended concerning Spencer's social philosophy, they reflected an attempt at certain knowledge of an entire structure; and by the 1890s fewer people possessed either the same confidence in their knowledge of the working of wholes, or in this certain knowability. An emerging or even common experience, perhaps, was one of limited ability to make any great penetration of, or impact upon, the order of things – 'a certain helplessness' as Hobhouse called it – coupled with a doubt that the general movement of things was of an unambiguously predictable character. A more reasonable approach in psychology was seen to be that of piecemeal research into cognitive structure (as opposed to Spencer's more obviously synthetic - deductive approach) and the construction of bodies of theory by the method of consilience, in which concepts in one theory are supported by concepts in other theoretical domains, or even in other disciplines (Hobhouse's *Theory of Knowledge*, 1896).

It might be objected that the movement away from activity in psychology had less to do with changes in the ambient sense of agency, and more to do with an increase in

the perceived attractiveness of the leisure lifestyle of the British aristocracy (Wiener, 1981). Or, perhaps, that psychology moved out of the hands of self-educated provincials like Spencer and returned, with psychologists such as James and Stout, behind the walls of traditional intellectual establishments (Kumar, 1981).

It is interesting in this connection to examine the psychological writings of George Lewes, a member of Spencer's circle at the mid-century, a prolific writer and not a university intellectual, but one whose writings departed critically from Spencer's when they were published posthumously a quarter of a century later (*The Study of Psychology*, 1879). Perhaps it should be noted that this appeared as volume 4 of the five-volume *Problems of Life and Mind*, a series which began appearing in 1873, Lewes dying in 1878. Like Spencer, Lewes in his earlier work explicitly excluded metaphysical explanations in general, and those of Hegel in particular (Tjoa, 1977), but in his later work he brings in the concept of the general mind as a source for aspects of experience that could not be derived by way of the Utilitarian psychology found elsewhere in *The Study of Psychology*, a concept which earlier might have been deemed Idealist, if not suspiciously metaphysical. Seen in this way, the social thus appears as something not external and offering resistance to the individual, but as an integral part of the human mind, part of its inner construction. He also refers to the concept of motivation by unconscious desires, arguably a further step towards a new consideration of mental structure.

But it is here especially that the study of Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* becomes most useful, since the movement away from the centrally active individual signified by *S*pencer's displacement of Utilitarian principles is obviously not explicable in terms of either of these arguments (i.e., of Wiener or of Kumar), which refer only to the late part of the century. There is plainly, with the shift of interest toward cognitive structure illustrated by Spencer's *Principles of Psychology*, some sort of reappraisal of the role of individual pursuit and individual agency much earlier in the century.

For this reason, it is tempting to view the increase of interest in cognitive structure in works that succeeded Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* as an indication of a *further* reappraisal of the agency of the individual; in short, one of the things that arguably led to Spencer's displacement of Utilitarian psychology perhaps in turn led to the rejection of his *Principles of Psychology* too.

In short, the significance of Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* in the Victorian development of psychology can perhaps be a little better appreciated by a glance at some of his other ideas and their sympathy, and discord, with the ambience of feeling about individual agency within his lifetime. This need not be understood as a suggestion that Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* were anything less than an attempt at a scientific psychology; rather, that they were the product of a scientific civilisation at a time when the individual was just beginning to occupy a modem place within it.

We can at this point return, however briefly, to the contemporary context, where the impact of this conclusion upon the debate around the use of Utilitarian ethics as a

means of resource allocation in medicine and social care can now be assessed. Plaud & Vogeltanz (1994) have referred to Spencer's 'ethical naturalism' and have questioned the appropriateness of applying it in social policy, whilst Buckle (2005) has traced ethical naturalism to Utilitarianism, where he detects irreconcilable principles. The argument is about whether the 'ought' can be derived from the 'is'. In Utilitarian (Mill's) terms, individual interest provides the volition in linking antecedent with consequent: what is good is what is pleasant to the individual, and ultimately for society, because if others are harmed by it, this ultimately rebounds upon the individual, reducing his/her pleasure. It is necessary only that the consequences of individual action are present to the individual, and that he/she reasonably pursues consequences from antecedents. Hence the psychological theory of associationism links directly with the moral philosophy of Utilitarianism.

Although, as Plaud & Vogeltanz (1994) argue, Spencer remains an ethical naturalist, nonetheless the foregoing argument has I hope shown that Spencer's associationism has moved away from Mill's in the mid-nineteenth century, despite the continued importance of activity in his psychology. There is also a suggestion that the moral becomes that which is in line with progress from the simple to the heterogeneous and from the contingent to the adapted, rather than simply being the individual's struggle with agreeable and disagreeable sensations writ large. Another way of putting this might be to say that the ethical naturalism of Utilitarianism, whatever its intrinsic contradiction between Humean and Kantian conceptions of reason (Buckle, 2005), seems to have enjoyed a certain appeal in the early nineteenth century amongst industrialists (Bain, 1882).

By mid-century, however, experiences of individual agency were somewhat different, and the changes are registered in Spencer's reworked associationism, even though activity continues to play a major role. As the century unfolds, psychological writing moves away from Spencer's physical evolutionism and further displaces activity. Spencer's criticisms of Bain's *Emotions and the Will* (1860) essentially chide Bain for 'inductivism' in the classification of the emotions, and for what Spencer perceived to be Bain's failure to adopt a proper evolutionary developmental perspective, reducing the will to a simple volitional concept.

By the late nineteenth century, Spencer's physical- evolutionary approach, in which activity continued to occupy a significant place, and his ethical naturalism, are increasingly displaced in Britain by ethical Idealism (Offer, 2004), and by the consilience-based approaches to cognitive structure and behaviour referred to earlier.

It would be myopic to leave this consideration of the role of Spencer's psychology in the Victorian development of psychology, however, without acknowledging its relation to the history of evolutionary psychology, and without acknowledging the impact of Darwin's work on the psychology that succeeded Spencer's. What has come to be known as Spencer's social Darwinism was a key part of his reformulated associationism (Rose & Rose, 2000). His move away from classical Utilitarian psychology thus also pointed him towards an evolutionary psychology, although not in the form that was developed in the twentieth century (see for example Pinker, 1994; Buss, 2008). There is hence the paradox that, if Spencer's psychology demonstrates the inappropriateness of resurrecting Utilitarian ethical naturalism, it at the same time presents an evolutionary psychology (in Spencer's terms) argument for a type of

ethical naturalism.

Summarizing the argument as a whole, it has been suggested that whilst Utilitarian ethical justifications for resource allocation – in which, for example, a formula is advanced for calculation of cost-benefit in terms of individual quality of life: years gained for a given procedure or treatment – have been criticized for their conflation of 'is 'and 'ought', and for their confusion of Humean and Kantian conceptions of reason, other criticisms may be made. In particular, it is suggested here that Utilitarian premises can be seen to be of their time, and an analysis of the position of Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* in the Victorian development of psychology has been advanced in support of this suggestion.

The ethical naturalism of Mill's Utilitarianism can be seen to be of a piece with his associationism, and to be the accompaniment of a particular experience of individual agency in the early part of the nineteenth century. Spencer's psychology at the mid-century perhaps illustrates the impermanence of that experience, even though it retains an emphasis upon individual activity and ethical naturalism.

Finally, Spencer's differences from the psychology of Bain and Lewes were seen to presage the displacement of ethical naturalism and the emerging ethical idealism of Hobhouse and others, in the later nineteenth century. This latter development is accompanied by a revived concept of the general will, and by consilience approaches to the investigation of mental phenomena and behaviour, and perhaps accompanied further changes in the experience of individual agency, suggesting its marginalization.

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Address for correspondence

Department of Social Sciences and Humanities,
University of Bradford
Richmond Road
Bradford
West Yorkshire
BD7 1DP
Email: g.bissell@ Bradford.ac.uk